COMMITTEE ON TOLERANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

PRIVATE EDUCATION IN ALBERTA

Discussion Paper

May, 1984

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This is the first of four discussion papers to be distributed by the Committee on Tolerance and Understanding, prior to its final report to the Minister of Education in December, 1984. The Committee intends to distribute discussion papers in June, September and October, relating to the topics of Education of the Aboriginal Children of Alberta, Curriculum and Professionalism, and Intercultural Education, respectively.

The intent of this discussion paper is to set before the citizens of the Province of Alberta the views of the Committee on Tolerance and Understanding with respect to the topic of Private Education in Alberta.

As this is the first statement of the Committee since its inception in July, 1983, it is appropriate to deal with some fundamentals principles that the Committee has established which serve to act as its guideposts in arriving at the draft recommendations contained in this discussion paper and others, leading to the final report.

During the course of our extensive travels throughout this Province, many individuals, groups and organizations have come to the Committee, endeavouring to define, often in absolute terms, what they feel is meant by the terms "tolerance" and "understanding".

> "Goethe, the German philosopher, stated that tolerance is an insult. We need to respect and encourage cultural diversity." (Glenda McCue, Lethbridge).

> "Tolerant - is sensitive to other points of view, but able to reject extreme or unethical positions, free from undue bias and prejudice," (Dr. K.C. Sauer, Medicine Hat Public School District #76).

> To others, tolerance means a "willingness to consider the viewpoints of others, with an openness to changing one's own position in light of new evidence", or

> To allow others to conduct their way of life without interference, or

> Tolerance implies variety and diversity.

We have also been warned that tolerance of a particular group act or practice may be undesireable.

> "The presupposition of tolerating something is that we find it unsatisfactory in some way. We tolerate, then, only those things we do not find adequate, but at the same time choose not to suppress, or are unable to suppress, or find it prudent not to try to suppress. " (Dr. Ivan DeFavari, University of Alberta

It has been suggested that we should advocate in our schools and ask of our students not simply that they tolerate different racial groups, but rather that they appreciate, welcome and respect the existing differences.

The word "tolerate" is difficult to interpret. Clearly, there are certain acts in our society such as bigotry and racism that a society should not tolerate.

What is implicit in our work, however, is the ultimate desire to recognize the obligation of our educational system to encourage an understanding and respect in our children of all people who compose the multicultural, religous and racial mosaic that is Alberta.

It has been both heartening and humbling that during the search for solutions to the contemporary problems we were addressing, that we were led to basic principles of social conduct that the wisest and best of humanity have struggled to articulate and put into practice throughout recorded history.

We cannot claim to have seen these principles in advance.

We would have been unable to put them to paper at the commencement of our deliberations.

Their presence was discovered by listening to Albertans, by probing, and

by discussion, in a process that resembled searching for the foundation and supporting walls of a sturdy building for which there were no available plans.

We have formulated principles which we feel are fundamental to any recommendation the Committee may make to the Minister of Education.

These principles will act as our guideposts.

There are times that these principles may overlap; there are times that these principles may be somewhat in conflict, however, that is natural when one considers the continual striving for balance that is inherent within the tensions that ebb and flow within a democratic society.

The six principles of the Committee on Tolerance and Understanding are as follows:

1. Alberta is an open, democratic society. One of the pillars of our strength is our commitment to permit and to encourage, if needed, the development of the diverse cultures, religions and philosophies that we embody into a vibrant, energetic and respectful society. In an open democracy, choices must not be denied by government edict unless they run clearly contrary to the overall public harmony.

2. It is the obligation of parents to ensure that the best education is available for their children.

3. It is the duty of society to provide maximum educational opportunities for its children and it is the right of the child to receive a compulsory education of no less than minimum acceptable standards.

4. The basic mission of education, among others, should be to instill in our children:

- a sense of self-esteem, the significance of which must never be understated.

- the ability to develop critical thinking skills characterized by values based on openness, inquiry, imagination, original ideas, dissent, rational thinking, creativity and independence.

- the appreciation of our democratic traditions, symbolized by an attitude of tolerance, understanding and respect for others, no matter what their origins or values may be.

- an attitude of creative citizenship characterized by a sense of responsibility that must flow back from each citizen to the society in which he lives.

5. The public education system (which in this report is deemed to include the separate school system) is the prime vehicle by which Alberta society meets its duty to its children in its endeavour to achieve its basic goals of education. Wherever possible, the public education system must be strengthened and society must not permit it to become unnecessarily weakened, eroded or fragmented. Financial priorities must be given to the assistance of teachers, School Boards, their administrations and libraries, in order that they may fulfill their responsibility of educating our children. School Boards, as a matter of policy, must provide maximum educational opportunities for all students resident in their jurisdictions.

6. In order to enhance tolerance and understanding and respect for each individual within the diverse mosaic that is so characteristic of Alberta, we must wherever possible encourage shared experiences in our schools among children of different cultures, races, religions, philosophies and ethnic backgrounds.

Within our consideration of the many presentations that have been made to our Committee with respect to alternate and private schools in the Province of Alberta, it has become evident that principle #1 is brought into conflict with some of the other stated principles.

Those who speak of concern with respect to the existence of alternate and/or private schools in this Province generally do so within the principles enunciated in principles #5 and 6.

Such conflicts in basic principles are not unusual in a democratic society.

Conflict, competition, compromise and clarification are continuous elements in an open democratic society. Although never easy to manage, it is preferable to have to be continually adapting in this way, rather than face the inevitability of cataclysmic change that must accompany rigidity, artificial harmony, and the potential resultant autocracy.

> "Any notion of tolerance and understanding which suggests a perfect state of peace and harmony denies the reality of human conflict and presents an unreal and confusing expectation to children and to all. Peace is not a state of achieved harmony, but a process of resolving conflict more justly and less violently." (Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association)

The challenge, then, is to develop ways of designing our social institutions so that they can keep pace with the complex and shifting balance of varied human ideals and experiences that make up our democratic open society.

Sadly, the conflict and competition can often lead to confrontation that becomes bitter. In October of 1983, the City of Calgary experienced in its Public School Board Trustee elections a debate over whether or not the public school system should permit religiously based alternative schools. At times this debate was reduced to inappropriate allegations and suggestions. The scars still remain, and segments of the community in Calgary are divided as charges of religious discrimination have been launched. The issue has been somewhat highlighted by the steps of the Calgary Separate School Board in accepting some alternate schools within their jurisdiction, but the overall problem still remains, and demands direct and clearcut policies so that future bitterness and racial disharmony will not re-emerge.

The Committee has received many submissions from Albertans who are very concerned about alternate and private schools, particularly as manifested in religiously based, independent schools with strong fundamentalist philosophies.

We have visited many of these schools.

We have examined some of their curriculum.

We have heard representations from their leaders.

We are respectful of their views and their rightful concern for the development and education of their children.

Our concern is also for the future of the children in this Province, and we are reminded:

"And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said,
Speak to us of Children.
And he said:
Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you.
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows might go swift and far."

(The Prophet)

The concern has been expressed to us in a more frank manner in a letter sent to the Committee from a couple in Czar:

> "By letting these illegal schools and private schools spring up, we believe the government is causing an injustice to the individual children attending those programs. If children are never exposed to other ways of life, they will have tunnel vision. Let's remember, these are the adults of tomorrow, the parents and ratepayers. How is my child going to be tolerant and understanding of others when some people believe he is inferior to begin with? They teach children in private schools that their way is the only right one, so this will in years to come cause conflict of society." (David and Diana Almburg)

Nor are their concerns restricted to religiously based alternative schools. Any school that is established apart from the public school system raises concerns with some Albertans, such as:

> "The mere existence of private schools (possibly including some separate schools) may in fact be in direct violation of the cause (of tolerance). Private schools by their very nature tend to be excluding institutions where generally the elite rich clearly would be exceptionally intolerant of the poor or the beliefs of others. The existence of I.B. (International Baccalaureate) schools or highly academic or high technology schools by their very nature should be subject to scrutiny by the Committee." (County of Minburn #27 Board of Education)

Those who are concerned about the intolerance of private schools also feel that the mixing ground of the public school is the best preparation for participation in our culture:

> "It is our opinion that generally, the truly public school system by its very cosmopolitan makeup of ethnicity and culture is probably the bastion of tolerance and understanding." (County of Minburn #27 Board of Education)

> "In a public school, by mingling with other children, a child has a cross-fertilization experience which enriches his or her life, and permits real and free choice. This in turn prepares the child for heterogeneous culture. Let us teach an awareness and acceptance of our differences, as well as the right to be different. The public school system is the perfect place to start, and provides the perfect opportunity from the time children are preschoolers." (Ruth Elzinga, School Trustee, Lethbridge School District)

> "If the Medicine Hat Public School Division loses 500 more students to private schools, their special programs for the handicapped and gifted, etc., will be seriously curtailed due to lack of funding. I am concerned that private schools will undermine the public school system." (E.W.N. Macdonald, Q.C., Chairman, Medicine Hat Public School Division)

> "Students should be integrated into public school systems to enhance tolerance and understanding. Children should be exposed to the characteristics and differences of other groups." (Sheldon Chumir, Save Public Education)

The Committee has also received submissions suggesting that some private schools in their teachings run contrary to the open, democratic systems that are fundamental in our society. It has been suggested to the Committee that within private schools, some of which operate without certified teachers or approved curriculum, the children are isolated from the mainstream of Alberta life and are reared in a doctrinaire, dogmatic environment which is not consistent with the goal of education to instill in our children the ability to develop critical thinking skills characterized by values based on openness, inquiry, imagination, originality of ideas, dissent, rational thinking, creativity and independence.

The Committee has also examined curriculum being utilized in some private schools in the Province which is, in the view of the Committee, intolerant and unacceptable in Alberta society. Such curriculum refers to Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism as "false transcendent" religions, and implies that those who follow those religions or those who may be humanistic in their philosophy of life are "godless, wicked and satanical". In the view of the Committee, there is no place for curriculum of this kind in the schools of Alberta.

That is not to say that the Committee finds that all private schools in this Province are intolerant. Isolated circumstances certainly should not be utilized to stereotype the whole system as being unacceptable.

On the other side of the argument, however, there are many Albertans who submit that the public school systems have inherent biases that are not obvious only because they correspond to the views of their supporters, and that these biases may put any minority cultural or religious group at a disadvantage.

> "Philosophically or religiously neutral curriculum is therefore impossible. Given the variety of philosophical and religious positions held by people in our society, it follows that a uniform curriculum in a public school system will necessarily be found offensive to some in our society. It will, in fact, violate the principle of religious freedom. Thus many religious parents, for whom education is inextricably intertwined with religion, find the system of public education to be religiously intolerant." (Dr.Elmer J. Thiessen, Medicine Hat College)

The fear of those who do not accept the value stance of public schools is that their familial values will be overridden, that the real objective of the common school is not tolerance but assimilation through unfair competition by those who hold the power in and over the institutions of education and who do not share their values.

"However, we must recognize that Canada has a long history of using its educational system not for the creation of a tolerant society, but to assimilate immigrants and native peoples into the majority's way of thinking and acting." (Citizens for Public Justice)

"We believe that many citizens could recognize the benefits of private schools as a complement to public education. One of the greater strengths of our society is our system of public education. However, this education must be complemented by the freedom of parents to initiate private schools. Such schools serve as a competitive element to prevent the public schools from becoming complacent with their accomplishments." (Medicine Hat Christian School Society)

Supporters of alternate schools suggest that the public school system must provide alternate forms of education in order to meet the diversity that is evident within the public school system in a pluralistic society. They point to the extensive work undertaken in bilingual, gifted, vocational, SPEDS and Plains Indian Cultural Survival School programs and suggest that within the alternate school program approach within a public school system, a true recognition of the diversity of our society and the needs of our children can be accomplished.

"I believe that we must have a school system where the schools remain public and are therefore owned by and open to everyone. But within that structure, the individual school should be responsible to the marketplace and reflect what the clientele wants. Professor of Education at McGill, Gary Anderson, S.O.N., believes, as I do, that every school should be an alternative school - a unique place with its own philosophy and way of doing things. He says, 'I would like to see...every school different in some way. People should have choices'." (Ann Tingle, Trustee, Calgary Board of Education)

For those who have submitted to the Committee that schooling experiences provided along religious lines will promote intolerance because of the isolation and the possibility of narrow indoctrination, the Committee is of the view that although this has clearly happened in some circumstances, there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that the existence of religiously oriented schools does, in an of itself, cause intolerance in Alberta.

> "Perhaps some religiously oriented schools do 'bring people apart', but not all."
> (Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association)

It is the view of the Committee that private schools, by their very nature, do not adequately meet the spirit and intent of some of the principles set out by the Committee, and particularly principles #5 and #6.

There is the danger, however small, that the public education system could become fragmented and eroded by the accelerated growth of the private school system.

In light of principle #6 relating to the goal of encouraging shared experiences in our schools, it is the observation of the Committee that many of the private schools examined by the Committee did not, as a matter of policy,

encourage shared experiences amongst their students with children of other religious or non-religious backgrounds, nor did some of them fairly explain other philosophical points of view in a balanced, uncompetitive manner.

Clearly, no society can function if any significant number of its people withdraw into self-righteous isolation. The give and take in the marketplace of ideas that gives democracy its resilience and enables it to adapt, is the same process that enables individuals to adapt. In the same way, the desire for narrow certainty that creates totalitarian nations also creates intolerant individuals, hostile and frightened by openness and uncertainty. Here is the central dilemma. How can an open democracy keep to its principles of encouraging freedom of thought and expression when the inclination of some individuals given such freedom would be to pursue ideals that ultimately destroy the system if widely accepted?

It is also clear that a solid sense of identity and self-esteem is a necessary prerequisite to effective cultural participation, and that in some instances this sense of identity is not, in the view of some parents, sufficiently served by the public school system.

Aboriginal education is a clear example of this, and will be dealt with in another discussion paper to be released by the Committee in June, 1984.

People learn, thrive and participate when they have a clear sense of identity and valued affiliations.

In some instances, the freedom to pursue such identities and affiliations, even through exclusive means, may offset the possible narrowing effect of a restricted environment.

To many, the sense of identity and self-esteem flow from religiously based value systems. To some, these value systems are not adequately expressed or dealt with within the public school system.

As is often the case in the resolution of the competing interests of a democratic society, the answer to the dilemma that we have endeavoured to describe in this paper lies between the poles of encouraging diversity, and freedom of religion and parental choice vs. the necessity to maintain a strong public education system and bringing children together so that they can learn by experience to appreciate and respect those from other backgrounds.

To remain consistent with the principles of our open democratic traditions, we must trust our citizens to make their own way.

If we are to err in our judgment, we must err on the side of trust and the good judgment of individual Albertans, rather than to veer towards easier solutions of more controls and more government involvement.

The policy dilemma, then, is how to ensure variety and flexibility in education, while maintaining an acceptable level of basic standards, and encouraging contact, openness and shared experiences that are so essential to our democracy, and our desire to enhance tolerance, understanding and respect within our community.

Clearly, our first priority must be to adapt and improve the public school system so that all Albertans will feel happy and content to send their children to the public school system with a sense of assurance that the diversity of their philosophical points of view, culture and special needs will be met.

In order to achieve this necessary balance within our school system, it is the view of the Committee, subject to any additional new information that the citizens of the Province of Alberta may wish to direct to the Committee following the release of this discussion paper, that the following recommendations should be considered by the Minister of Education:

DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

BACKGROUND TO RECOMMENDATIONS

There are presently four categories of private schools recognized by the Department of Education.

Category 1 private schools have a long history in the Province, and have generally been denominational private schools, e.g. Camrose Lutheran College, Three Hills Prairie Bible Institute. It has been a recent occurrence to have local church-based private schools. These schools follow the Alberta Educational program and curricula and employ certified teachers.

Category 2 private schools have developed for the handicapped, generally as a result of parent groups starting educational services for handicapped students because such services were not being provided by school boards. The Committee would be remiss if it did not comment on the dedication and resourcefulness exhibited by those individuals involved in providing these services. Some school boards in Alberta have assumed the responsibility of providing these services, and should be commended, e.g. Lethbridge, Grande Prairie and Wetaskiwin. Regrettably, not all boards recognize this responsibility.

Category 3 private schools are generally language (Saturday) schools, for instruction in a heritage language. Funding is minimal and provided through the Department of Culture. It appears that there is now considerable opportunity through language programs in schools for such instruction, however if some parental groups wish to provide further instruction in heritage languages, they should be able to do so.

Category 4 private schools follow approved programs but do not necessarily employ certified teachers.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That all private schools requesting financial support from the government come within the jurisdiction of their local public school board, and be known as "alternate schools". The financing available to such alternate schools will be identical to that now being received by Category 1 schools (75% of the School Foundation Program Fund Grant). Such alternate schools must be accepted by the local School Boards irrespective of religious or cultural character, and agree to follow these suggested guidelines:

a) employ certified teachers;

b) use curriculum which follow the guidelines of Alberta Education and its local Board;

c) use diploma examinations;

d) submit to annual Board evaluations;

e) accept the policies of the Board as they apply to alternative programs;

f) assume all costs over and above the 75% per student costs granted by the Province;

g) must participate in shared experience programs such as science fairs, cultural programs, sports events, debates, school exchanges, etc.

Local Boards must accept the application of any group who shall contractually agree through their Board to accept the stated guidelines.

2. No provincial government financing will be available to private schools unless they qualify within the alternate school category.

3. Category 4 private schools should be abolished.

4. Alternate schools shall receive from the Province an additional 5% grant to assist them to develop inter-school contacts and shared experiences with other schools within their jurisdiction.

5. Special grants shall be awarded to School Boards to assist them to facilitate jurisdictional supervision and administration contemplated by these recommendations.

6. With respect to Category 2 schools brought within the jurisdiction of public School Boards as alternate schools, the Boards should allocate from special

funding already available, additional financial assistance over and above the 75% of the School Foundation Program Fund Grant available to alternate schools, for the education of these children.

7. Alberta Education must undertake a review of curriculum being utilized in the private/alternate school system, to ensure that within that curriculum there are no materials that tend to reflect discriminatory and/or prejudicial attitudes towards any religious, cultural, ethnic, racial or philosophical group.

SOME RAMIFICATIONS OF THE DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

Diversity of programs within the school system in Alberta is a commendable goal. There are, however, reasonable limitations where the public school system cannot be expected to provide the extent of programming that all parents may wish. Should parents, for whatever reason, wish to enroll their children into specially oriented schools, the opportunity to do so should be available.

These additional opportunities may result in specially oriented programs, smaller teacher-pupil ratios, more perceived discipline, and other factors that may to some parents be advantageous.

It is the view of the Committee that those wishing schools of this nature for their children should reasonably be required to pay for the additional perceived benefits.

The Committee does not recommend the reduction of present granting policies of the Department of Education to those schools known as Category I Private Schools. Such government assistance should remain the same, subject, however, to such schools becoming alternate schools within the recommendations contained in this report. For a few schools in Alberta, this will result in a diminution of government support, in that a few schools in the Province have operated as alternate schools within their jurisdiction and have received almost full financial assistance, save for the cost of special programs for which the parents have paid additional fees.

The Committee is of the view that it is reasonable to place all private schools in the Province under the same financial umbrella.

The Committee is mindful of jurisdictional difficulties that may arise in bringing the private schools within the public school system. However, the Committee is confident that these difficulties can be easily overcome with sincere effort and goodwill being exhibited by all parties concerned.

In the Province of Alberta, there are a number of schools (the exact number is apparently unknown) that operate without certified teachers and do who not follow an approved curriculum.

Local school boards should seek out these schools and encourage them to come within their jurisdictions so that their students will not function in isolation and without the benefit of experiencing minimum educational standards.

These schools (sometimes referred to as "illegal schools") do not provide the minimum acceptable standards referred to in principle #3 of this report. There is a point where society must recognize a child's right to an education of no less than minimum acceptable standards. When those rights come into conflict with the parents' desire to raise their children in accordance with their religious or other beliefs, the child's rights must take priority.

> "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups...." (Article 26, The International Bill of Human Rights, United Nations)

The Committee will be pleased to receive written communication from interested Albertans with respect to the views of the Committee as contained

within this discussion paper. Such communications should be addressed to the Committee at the following address:

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